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Book Review

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Of Crime And the River

By Elizabeth Royte

THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE SCARLET MACAW One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird. By Bruce Barcott. 313 pp. Random House. \$26.

In his unparalleled "Encounters With the Archdruid," John McPhee describes the conservationist's version of "hell on earth" as a series of concentric circles. At the outermost ring of the "devil's world" is a moat "filled mainly with DDT" (this was 1971, remember). Next comes "a moat of burning

gasoline," then there are bulldozers and chain saws, until one reaches "the absolute epicenter ... where stands a dam." Why? "Because rivers are the ultimate metaphors of existence, and dams destroy rivers." It's that simple. When McPhee wrote "Encounters With the Archdruid," the American conservation movement was a religious and mystical force. It may still be so today, but the movement now employs nearly as many big-city lawyers and consultants as any corporation hoping to develop a mine, oil field or

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ILLUSTRATION BY MONIKA AICHELE

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... dam. They're out in force in Bruce Barcott's new book, "The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird," the story of a bitter fight against a dam in western Belize. No, it doesn't sound thrilling (which is doubtless why the publisher kept the word "dam" out of the title), but Barcott, a contributing editor at *Outside* magazine and the author of "The Measure of a Mountain: Beauty and Terror on Mount Rainier," makes it so, mashing up adventure travel, biography and nature writing in a steamy climate of corruption and intrigue.

At stake is a magnificent (of course) river valley, home to a Who's Who of threatened neotropical charismatics: tapirs, pumas, river otters, howler monkeys and the eponymous scarlet macaw. Leading the anti-dam brigade, in the name of biodiversity wrecked, is Sharon Matola, an impetuous autodidact who runs the Belize Zoo. Matola is described as a motorcycle-riding, lion-taming, monkey-smuggling Air Force veteran who's expert in jungle survival and in mushroom, tapir and macaw biology. But because she's an American, it's easy for corrupt local officials to marginalize her as an enemy of the state and her ex-pat allies as "wealthy white foreigners determined to keep Belizeans hungry and poor." "First came the Spanish," Barcott writes, "then the British, and now the American Greens."

Attempting to silence Matola, the government threatens to stick a garbage dump next to her zoo, but instead of backing down she calls in one of the most powerful environmental groups in the world, the Natural Resources Defense Council, which sees in the plight of the flamboyant macaw — of which Belize has only 200 left — an easy win.

Ha.

The more the N.R.D.C. learns about the proposed dam, the worse it looks for its boosters. An exhaustive environmental analysis reveals the project will destroy plant and animal habitats, and the dam will threaten the lives and livelihoods of people downriver, some of whom depend on ecotourism dollars. A close look at the dam's economics shows it will raise, not lower, energy rates for Belizeans. The dam's geological analysis is a complete fiction, claiming granite where there is none; the project's engineers have even contrived to erase a geologic fault line from a map of the site. And while the developers claimed the project would give the country energy independence, sweetheart deals promised riches to the dam's first owner, the multinational Duke En-

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ergy, whether power was produced or not. As Barcott writes, "the dam was a fiasco: environmentally devastating, economically unsound, geologically suspect and stinking of monopoly profiteering."

Yet Matola and the N.R.D.C. are helpless to stop it. And this story of defeat is fascinating for what it reveals about envi-

ronmental imperialism, the legacy of colonial oppression and the enduring temptations of power. The legal case against the dam eventually worked its way through Belizean courts to the law lords of England's Privy Council. There, evidence and precedent appeared to be on the environmentalists' side until Belize's attorney

general made the case for his country's economic progress. And then all of a sudden, an environmentalist who witnessed the proceedings says, it became five white guys in England "telling the black guys in Belize whether they can turn the lights on or not."

You may think you've heard this tale before: the tree/bird/fish huggers against the land-raping multinationals. But few parts of Barcott's story are what they appear: what's local is global, insiders are outsiders (and vice versa) and scientists transform themselves, with the signing of nondisclosure agreements, into "biostitutes" for hire. Matola herself is a complicated hero — "strange and sometimes aggravating."

Barcott deftly unsnarls his story's many strands and keeps them taut. He explains complicated deals clearly, dramatizes legal proceedings and leads readers on delightful (to this reviewer, at least) excursions into how one makes, stores and moves energy from water; the environmental downside of dams; and how and why animals go extinct. With a deep understanding of so many environmental issues and their larger context, Barcott presents evidence and then states strongly — but never shrilly

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— what other writers might hedge on. Mammoth concrete dams "kill rivers." Programs to mitigate a dam's biological damage "usually disappear once the dam goes up." Habitat destruction in remote areas, like Belize's Macal River valley, "happens because too many people are willing to serve up half-truths, erase fault lines and rig studies in order to get paid. It happens because too few people have the courage or capacity to stand against powerful institutions on behalf of powerless creatures like red seed-eating birds."

At the turn of the 20th century, John Muir and a band of allies rallied to stop the construction of the Hetch Hetchy dam in Yosemite National Park. Muir lost, San Francisco got great water and the modern American environmental movement was born. In closing, Barcott inevitably compares the fight against the Macal dam with the one against Hetch Hetchy, noting that Yosemite was flooded during a time of great natural abundance. Inundating the Macal may be an even greater crime, the author suggests: we have many years' worth of experience with destructive dams, and so very little of the natural world remains. □